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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the phenomenological approach to text translation first analyzes the deconstructive approach, contrasts the two, and then describes the elements of the phenomenological approach that offer promise for the improvement of translation. The deconstructive theory, which draws on the insights of post-structuralism on the question of language and meaning and posits that it is impossible to transfer pure meaning from one language to another, is seen as resting on shaky assumptions and posing both theoretical and practical problems for translation. The assumptions include the following: exhaustive translations are impossible; inherent plurality of meaning makes precise determination of meaning impossible; and literary texts differ significantly from other text types in their treatment of reality. It is proposed that the phenomenological approach reaffirms the traditional concepts and norms of translation, proceeding from the conviction that it is possible to make an independent, objective inquiry about reality. It is argued that any translation may reflect cultural bias because that is a human trait. Further, it is proposed that exhaustive translation is possible, although difficult. A general strategy for teaching translation is outlined. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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TEXT AND CONTEXT IN TRANSLATION: THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Introduction

Traditionally, translation has often been defined as the preservation and faithful communication of meaning from one language into another. In the light of this definition, teachers of translation focus mainly on the fidelity and intelligibility of a given translation in relation to the original. This concept of translation has come in for many blows in recent years particularly from Post-structuralists who propose instead the deconstructive approach to translation. By challenging the view that language is a stable structure, with a clearly demarcated relational unity between the signifiers and the signifieds, scholars like Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan also question the notion of faithfulness in the translation of meaning.

Despite the growing optimism towards the deconstructive approach to translation expressed by such notable scholars like V.N. Komissarov, Raymond van den Broeck, Jan Vilikovsky and Joseph Graham to mention but a few, it would seem to us that this approach is predicated on shaky assumptions. This paper looks at the implications of this theory to the teaching of translation. It also seeks to support the traditional heresies on translation teaching by suggesting the phenomenological approach as a better alternative.

The Deconstructive Approach

The deconstructive approach draws on the insights of Post-structuralism on the question of language and meaning. Post-structuralists use some of the arguments perfected by structuralists to query the very idea of language as a structure. They contend that if, as Ferdinand de Saussure seemed to argue, that the signifier "ball" for example, acquires meaning by virtue of its being different from other signs like "bale", "belle", "bell", "belly," "bile," "bill," "bull" and so on, then the meaning of "ball" would remain perpetually suspended in view of the endless interaction of signifiers. This perpetual suspension would seem to cast doubt on Saussure's definition of sign as a symmetrical unit between one signifier and one signified. In other words, meaning is in a way absent from the sign, because the meaning of a sign is acquired in terms of what they sign is not. It is therefore impossible to pin down meaning as it is scattered over all signifiers.

Post-structuralists concluded that since nothing is ever fully present in signs, meaning is illusory, and that by using the method of 'De-construction' it is possible to undermine thought-systems including metaphysical ones. A literary text is considered indeterminate, unstable and enjoying such an 'irreducible plurality' of meaning as to abolish the distance between writing and reading. Paul de Man for example says 'the distinction between author and reader is one of the false distinctions that deconstruction makes evident.[1] "One of the prime functions of speech," says Lacan,

"is not to reveal thoughts, but to conceal them, especially from ourselves".[2] He regards conscious speech as an attempt to repress the virtually irrepressible unconscious as Terry Eagleton says:

> But for Lacan all our discourse is in a sense a slip of the tongue: if the process of language is as slippery and ambiguous as he suggests, we can never mean precisely what we say and never say precisely what we mean. Meaning is always in some sense an approximation, a near-miss, a part-failure, mixing non-sense and non-communication into sense and dialogue.[3]

Quite understandably, these ideas about language and meaning have had considerable implications on what translation is or should be all about. Some of the key concepts that have long defined translation like the distinction between form and content are now questionned or modified. P.E. Lewis for example redefines the concept of fidelity in translation to incorporate both message and modalities of expression. With a view to compensating for what is lost in translation Lewis proposes the use of an openly abusive translation. A translation which seeks to reinforce the rhetorical vigour of the original with an addition, commentary or supplement. This strategy eventually replaces translation with commentary. He says:

> For commentary to supplement the translation is perhaps first to add to it, to correct it, simply to contest its recuperations by exposing them; but ultimately that move, if it is not to acquiesce to the very discursive order of the translation that it questions, turns into a replacement of the translation ... commentary supplies the translation by doing other than translation. In the wake of translation, the mission of commentary is to translate in difference.[4]

Oviously these abuses blur the dividing line between translation and commentary. In fact it becomes very problematic even to identify the original language, author or text. The term "invagination" i.e. the sheathing of an object and the turning inside out of the sheath itself, has been used to refer to the relationship between originality and identity. Commenting on this new, fusion between the original and translation Richard Rand says:

> We would no longer look upon translation as the faithful return of a debt ... but would construe it instead as a process of mutual indebtedness, not to be resolved because the property can never be properly assigned in the first place. It is, instead con-fused.[5]

One of the major effects of Jacques Derrida's deconstructive approach to texts has been to replace the traditional ideal of translability with the idea of transformation. Derrida argues that since it is impossible to have a pure transfer without remnants the concept of transformation must substitute that of translation:

> ...and for the notion of translation, we would have to substitute a notion of <u>transformation:</u> a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another. We never will have, and in fact never have had, a "transport" of pure signifieds from one language to another, or within one and the same language, that the signifying instrument would leave virgin and untouched.[6]

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A Critique

It would seem to us that despite its growing popularity, the deconstructive approach to translation raises several problems both theoretical and practical.

Proceeding from the assumption that it is impossible to transfer pure signifieds from one language to another or even within the same language, the deconstructive approach considers the impossibility of exhaustive translations as a foregone conclusion. To remedy the situation this approach proposes the use of abusive translations which would translate in difference by supplementing, and filling in the gaps or remnants which conventional translation is sure to leave behind. The postulate underlying, this approach is open to debate. Admittedly it is virtually impossible to reproduce in the target language textural features of rhyme of rhythm in the translation of proverbs like, "East or West home is best" or "A stitch in time saves nine". Nevertheless, in theory these proverbs are translatable in any language. To acknowledge the virtual impossibility of reproducing textural features of a given text is to admit the obvious. For it is impossible for two different words to have the same texture even if they mean one and the same thing. The resonance of the word "papa" for example differs from that of "daddy" despite their having the same dictionary meaning.; It is therefore misleading to reject the possibility of exhaustive translation on the basis of textural differences.

Similarly the notion that since words enjoy an irreducible plurality of meaning it is impossible for one to say precisely what one means or vice versa is also erroneous. In most cases the context can determine the exact meaning of a word. When for example a meter indicating the amount of fuel in a motor vehicle reads "empty" it is very unlikely that the motorist or translator will understand the word "empty" as an invitation to attend a wedding ceremony somewhere. The same can be said about labels of medical prescriptions, news bulletins, UN ressolutions and so on and so forth. It would appear therefore that there is a large corpus of discourse which is amenable to exhaustive translation.

Some scholars (like Jan Vilikovsky) suggest that it is particularly the literary discourses which defy exhausitive translations. This is because literary texts normally use words which are in excess of their immediate, pragmatic meaning, thereby inviting interpretational ambiguity or at least multiple interpretations. The problem with this argument is that the demarcation between literary and non-literary texts is rather arbitrary. It is not based on any inherent qualities within each category. Depending on the time, place or mood a text can easily shift from a literary to a non-literary territory or can simultaneously be classified as a literary text by some and as a non-literary text by others. The bible is a good example. At any rate, ambiguity does not seem

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to respect the literary and non-literary divide. Even a public notice may be ambiguous, as one which reads 'Refuse to be put in this basket' cited by Terry Eagleton in his book, Literary Theory. Since the distinction between the literary and the non-literary is functional rather than ontological, it is apparently misleading to dichotomize translation on the basis of literariness.

In fact the deconstructive approach to the translation of literary texts reflects and perpetuates the modernist equivocation concerning the relation between literature and reality. The positivists refused to grant literature any status as genuine knowledge on the ground that it was nothing but a body of superstitious ideas with no bearing to objective reality. On the other hand literature was defended by the Romantics, New Critics, structuralists, and Post-structuralists in terms which seemed to undermine literature's referential powers, and thereby cutting its link with objective reality. The autonomy of literature was absolutised. Literature, it was argued, was self-referential. It was not about life but about itself. To paraphrase a poem was therefore heretic for "a poem should not mean but be."

Skepticism about man's rational capabilities to make sense of the immense complexity of experience became an article of faith. It some modernist writings today it is fashionable to describe reality or truth as nothing but fiction or myth. The concept of fictionality of reality is used very selectively as Gerald Graff says:

> I can recall being puzzled when I first started reading intellectual journals in the early fifties at the fact that words, such as "myth" and "fiction" seemed to change their meaning depending on whether they appeared in the literary or political sections. When they appeared in the political papers of such journals, these words were invariably synonymous with lying and untruth. Yet when they made their appearance in the literary pages of the same journals, they became synonymous with truth and wisdom -- of a higher kind than that which is expressible in rational or logical formulations. Eventually I began to understand that there were two separate epistemologies, a "realistic" one that applied to everyday practical affairs and to public matters and a literary one that applied to "values" and to the mysteries of personal experience. As long as one was concerned with everyday matters and with politics, it was permissible to talk as if reality were an objective thing intelligible to rational understanding, and as if truth and falsity, fact and fiction, were distinguishable. When one shifted to literary discussion, this way of talking was considered naive or vicious.[7]

Graff further says that whenever someone proposes the reconciliation of science with literature, the idea is not that "Literature and science are one, in that both give us objective knowledge about the world" but rather, "Literature and science are one, in that both are essentially fictions by which we make sense of the world; the objectivity of science is itself a fiction, a myth, a paradigm, a framework, an ideology, a model, etc."[8]

The deconstructive approach to literature differs from the mimetic in several important ways. Under mimesis a text is regarded as a reflection or representation of social realities. Truth is conceived in terms of its correspondence to objective reality. Under the deconstructive orientation truth is fiction or invention and a literary text is conceptualised as an open, indeterminante

invitation to xplore the limitless recesses of human experience. Discussion about the limitations of the deconstructive approach to literature is beyond the scope of this paper. It is important however to bear in mind that the deconstructive approach to translation is tailored to suit the deconstructive orientation towards literature. With respect to the teaching of translation the logic of the deconstructive approach seems to have one major draw back: the virtual impossibility of offering guidance to translators, and the redundance of translation criticism.

The Phenomenological Approach.

This approach reaffirms the traditional concepts and norms of translation. It has nothing in common with Edmund Husserl's philosophy of Transcendental Phenomenology except for the idea of bracketting off one's biases in one's quest for reality. The phenomenological approach to translation proceeds from a conviction that it is possible to make an independent, objective inquiry about reality. Upon ciritical reflection it would appear that no theory about reality can stand without directly or indirectly affirming the possibility of objectivity. A lot has been said about the unreality of reality and the fictionality of objectivity. It is often pointed out that the interference of factors like ideology, language, culture and history render the idea of objectivity meaningless. It is argued that no matter how much one tries one cannot

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shake off one's history and the biases of one's culture because these factors are constitutive elements of his or her humanity. One cannot therefore describe reality in culture-free terms.

Since no one can totally brush aside one's cultural biases anyone's translation is liable to reflect one's cultural prejudices. It is not possible therefore to have an accurate, objective translation. This line of reasoning cannot escape criticism, for it is obviously self-refuting. The conclusion that it is impossible to describe reality in culture-free terms can onlyb be valid if we assume that it is possible to describe reality in culture-free terms after all!

With regard to translation, the phenomenological approach, while acknowledging the possible interference of socio-cultural factors firmly asserts that it is possible (though by no means easy) to have an exhaustive translation of meaning. It is equally possible to improve the quality of translation through training and translation criticism. If my personal experience in the teaching of translation is anything to go by, traditional strategies may be very helpful in improving the quality of translation. These strategies include:

1. Proficiency and fluency in both, SL and TL
2. Firm grasp of the subjects involved in the translation process including general and background information.

3. Identifying and solving typical translation problems.

4. Effective use of translation criticism.

Obviously, language competence is a necessary condition for effective translation. The translator's mastery of the idiom of both languages serves to sharpen his or her awareness of translation problems involved as well as how best to overcome them. The translator must also be conversant with the subject he is attempting to translate. Without adequate theoretical grounding one can hardly translate correctly concepts used in some specialized disciplines. Finally, if properly used, translation criticism can go a long way in helping translators improve their work.

Using the strategy outlined above, the instructor can markedly improve the quality of translation of his or her students. I believe, I have managed to do so with my undergraduate students even though Translation Theory and Practice is only a minor component in a Theory of Literature course.

The procedure I have been using can be summarized as follows:

(1) Setting a language competence examination to test their comprehension and writing skills

(2) Making arrangements for intensive remedial courses on areas which students appear to be weak

(3) Practice on selected short stories or passages from literary works of art with emphasis on:

- linguistic aspects
- history of the text or author (if available)
- artistic merits of the work
- actual translations by students

(4) Rigorous translation criticism

- comparing notes
- justifying differences in translation
- explanations on why a particular translation is inadequate or wrong.

This approach to translation is of course, not problem-free. But at least from my experience it is certainly possible to have an exhaustive translation even in literary works of art. Quite interestingly, after translating into Kiswahili a passage from August Strindberg's play Father the class voted by secret ballot to find out which was the best translation. It is instructive that the same translation was rated as the best in five other classes. The unanimity may be indicative of the identity of translation theory and criteria. But it also shows that within a given theory it is possible to equal an original text in translation, despite their distance in time and place.

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NOTES

1. Paul de Man, "Semiology and Rhetoric" in Josue V. Harari, ed. Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-structuralist Criticism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p.138.

2. Anthomy Wilden, "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other,""in Jacques Lacan, The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis (trans. Anthomy Wilden (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), p.241.

3. Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.169.

4. Philip E. Lewis, "The Measure of Translation Effects" in Joseph F. Graham (ed). Difference in Translation (Ithaca and Lond: cornell university Press, 1985), p.62.

5. Richard Rand, "O"ver-brimm'd" in Difference in Translation p.6.

6. Jacques Derrida, Positions, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p.20.

7. Gerald Graff, Literature Against Itself (Chicago and London: The university of Chicago press, 1979), p.14.

8. Gerald Graff, Literature Against Itself, p.15.